The Art and Science of Interviewing Groups: Focus Group Fundamentals

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Outline

• Focus Groups Defined
• Strengths & Limitations
• Uses and Abuses
• Pragmatics of Planning and Running Focus Groups
  – Study purpose & design
  – Sampling
  – Developing interview guide
  – Focus group stages & moderation
  – Analysis process & tips
“Carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment”

(Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5)
Key Elements

- Controlled process and environment
- Structured process to collect and interpret data
- Participants purposefully selected

(Larsen, Grudens-Schuck, & Allen, 2004)
Focus Group Characteristics

6-12 participants
1-1.5 hours
3-5 moderated sessions - same topic with separate groups
Usually 5-10 questions
Strengths

• Low cost
• Speedy results
• Socially oriented research procedure
  – Participants inform one another
  – Relaxed environment prompts increased candor
Limitations

• Less control in group interview
• Data more difficult to analyze
• Groups may be difficult to assemble
• Quality depends on moderator
Focus groups are used to:
- Understand range of ideas, concerns, experiences, beliefs, or feelings
- Learn language used by potential survey respondents
- Help interpret survey responses
- Assist with program development or evaluation (insight whether program has achieved goals)
Uses and Abuses

- Focus groups are **inappropriate** for:
  - Building consensus
    - Delphi techniques more appropriate
  - Educating
  - Emotionally charged (conflict) environments
  - Topics in which other methods can produce better quality information
Focus groups are less useful if:

- Deep/detailed responses are needed
- Individual reactions are likely to vary and this difference is important to capture
- The topic is very sensitive and likely to involve private reactions
Pragmatics of Planning and Running Focus Group

Study Purpose
• Advisory committee?
  – Problem to address?
  – How will info be used?

Challenges in public and nonprofit environments
• Sponsor unclear - fuzzy
• Sponsor has exaggerated expectations
Ideal Design:

- Conduct groups until reach point of theoretical saturation
- Typically 3-4

Design Types:

- Single-category
- Multiple-Category (e.g., want to compare responses of different groups; age, relationship)
- Double-layer (e.g., may extend comparisons to different regions)
- Broad-Involvement (e.g., studies of widespread public interest, may includes geographic representation)

(Krueger & Casey, 2009)
Selecting Participants

- Purposive sampling: Homogenous not Diverse
- Consider how group composition will influence sharing
  - Power issues
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Age
Selecting Participants

• If cross section of views from diverse populations is of interest, conduct multiple sessions with different group of people
  – (e.g., as in multiple category or double-layer design)
Selecting Participants

- Incentives
  - Money ($20-$50)
  - Food
  - Gifts
  - Positive, upbeat invitation
Developing the Interview Guide

- Brainstorm
- Phrase the questions
- Sequence the questions
- Estimate time for each question
- Get feedback from others
- Revise the questions
- Test the questions

  - (Krueger & Casey, 2009).
Designing the Interview Guide

• Topics - Proceed
  – logically from one topic to another
  – from general to specific

• Questions (see p. 2):
  – Simple, non-threatening, unbiased
  – 5 types of questions
  – Pilot test
1. Opening Topic: Setting Scene & Ground Rules
   - Welcome & Introduction: Create permissive atmosphere
     - Describe purpose: Use of data
     - Provide ground rules
     - Document informed consent
   
   • (see handout p. 3)
Focus Group Stages

2. Discussion

3. Ending the Discussion
   – Wind up, summarize
   – Gather participant data
   – Thank participants
   – Describe follow up
Understanding Group Process

Tuckman Model of Team Development and Facilitator Role

Forming
Set/Clarify Objectives

Storming
Facilitate Relationships

Norming
Facilitate Processes

Performing
Coach, Observe & Support

Adjourning
Postmortem
Moderators

• Facilitate the discussion
  – Verbal and nonverbal
  – Pauses and Probes

• Maintain subtle group control
  – Encourage quieter participants
  – Respond to dominant talkers

• Keep on track
  – See “Moderator Skills”, p. 4
Assistant Moderators

- Help to host
- Arrange Logistics
  - Equipment & supplies
  - Consent forms
  - Refreshments
  - Room
  - Unexpected interruptions
- Are record keepers
- Provide short summary
  - See “Assistant Moderator Skills”, p. 4
The Unexpected Happens

- Nobody shows up
- Only a few attend
- Meeting place inadequate
- Group doesn’t talk
- Group so involved doesn’t want to leave
- Hazardous weather just before meeting
- Early questions take too much time, leaving little time to ask final questions

(Krueger & Casey, 2009)
Analysis Process & Tips

• Analysis Guided by Study Purpose:

• Analysis is:
  – Systematic
  – Verifiable
  – Sequential
  – Continuous
    • (Krueger & Casey, 2009)

  – See handout (pp. 5-6)
Resources:

• See Reference list
• “Doing Focus Groups” (Barbour, R., 2007, Sage Pub.)